

oliver's world

oliver jackson's paintings—
at once familiar and strikingly
foreign—leap from the canvas and
into a life embraced.

BY ADELE SLAUGHTER

Looking at Oliver Jackson's paintings is like coming across a simple word like sure but not recognizing it. You're positive it's misspelled, as though a mysterious hex has been cast over your sense of reality. Likewise, Jackson's paintings are deeply familiar, yet spring from a world you've never known.

Jackson, 64 (he looks a handsome 40), has exhibited his artwork from New York to San Francisco. While his paintings and sculpture defy pigeonholing, he is considered a neo-Expressionist. For over 25 years he has taught art at California State University, Sacramento, and lives in a decidedly live-alone painting loft/studio home in Oakland, California.

Jackson is prolific. This reporter missed her plane home in part because she wanted to view every one of his exceptional pieces of art, and also because of his unrelenting charm. He smoked a Cuban cigar (a recent gift), sipped Irish whiskey and waved his hands as he talked about painting, privacy, God and St. Louis.

A painted figure sits on his haunches, in a field watching the sky shift, bleeding blue.

CODE: Tell us about your childhood.

Oliver Jackson: I was raised in St. Louis, where the weather is stunning. Thunderstorms come up, the color, the incredible violence, the way they disappear suddenly . . . then the winter storms,

their stunning power, I absorbed it.

As a child, playing, I'd lay down in the grass and my size would change. The grass got large and the grass and the sky were me and were not me. I felt joy that there was a magical world. There was no knowing, just being. Nowadays, I don't like St. Louis in certain ways. I don't forgive the smugness of the place—the death and dying among African-Americans because of the conditions. At the same time, I learned to hear in St. Louis.

Figures made of paint and circle, God in the artist's hand.

CODE: Do you have a spiritual practice?

OJ: I practice being able to be with myself and not be angry with or in judgment of myself. I'm practiced at seeing myself without prejudice and can accept what's not adequate. I change the things I want to. I also don't change things that should be changed, because I'm not ready.

CODE: A higher power?

OJ: It sounds good but you can't prove it. That's how great the mystery is. Ain't no rules for God. God makes rules, but nobody knows what they are. The most humble before God may be the atheist. Why? Because he disregards God. Those who regard God too much lock God into rules that make them comfortable.

CODE: Do you fear death?

OJ: No. What makes me sad is that I am sad about dying, and that's ridiculous. But I'm full of ridiculous shit.

Paint figures aren't black, brown or white, man or woman, no sense of race. Just circles of blue, red, green, yellow and lovely calla lilies.

OJ: No good art is about race. That's why I like Charlie Parker: He didn't play black, he played Charlie Parker. Those who got it got it, and the ears don't give a damn. We put ideas between the art and the viewer. Poets, painters, musicians talk too much. You wrote the poem, let it stand; you made the painting, get out of the light; you made the music, let the ears do the work. We don't trust the very thing it came from.

A single blue flower with its tiny yellow center or millions of stars in the blue-black night—if Mona Lisa smiles in the forest, does no one see her?

CODE: Let's say you have a vision, but the painting emerges differently.

OJ: Change that sucker. I fall in love with an inner image, which resonates in me as ding ding—so the painting has to say ding ding, not ding dong. With self-confidence, the vision will endure.

People are afraid of experience. Nobody has patience for it, sometimes it is not pleasing. If you look at a painting and want to know what it means, don't turn away, keep looking at it. Don't go get a teacher—he'll just tell you what the meaning is, and it



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won't be the meaning you would get on your own. If a painting grabs you, you will supply the meaning. Two weeks later you may change your interpretation. The experience of art is not group stuff.

Out of marble rises a shapely back, so smooth it begs touch.

CODE: What is style to you?

OJ: Miles Davis. He had inward and outward style. Outward style makes you accessible, but has to do with a kind of vanity. Inward style is how you perceive yourself spiritually. Inner style is the weights and balances, how much of your activities you give to others and how much you reserve for yourself . . . understanding how much you need and when you are in excess. When I eat, when I look at things, I stop when I'm finished. I know when I'm full. That's style.

CODE: What does Jackson, the painter, wear?

OJ: In the studio, I usually wear clogs

and painting clothes. But sometimes I'll be wearing something hip and I'll want to work, so I'll just start. Some of my nicest clothes have a spot on them. And that's a problem.

Sun-soaked colors dance, perch, lay on canvas like wind chimes.

CODE: What do you hold close to your heart?

OJ: I'm real protective of my personal life. I don't let people play around with tender shit; it's not correct.

CODE: Has your heart ever been broken?

OJ: Oh yeah, but more than once. Ain't no big deal on that. We have too many conditions for lovers, that's why lovers make bad friends. Why do we feel we can go through her or his drawer? You'd never do that to friends, you respect them too much. I think I have lovers and I think I have relationships, but that's just me talking.

CODE: What's love?

OJ: My father or my mother could call out my name like nobody else. It tells

you they had intimate access. Love's beyond expression.

Floating on white in a circle of figures—you are green with blue arms, a brush strokes your cheek and you laugh. There's room, come in.

UPCOMING SHOWS:

September 24–November 5, 1999
Porter Troupe Gallery
301 Spruce Street
San Diego, California
Call (619) 291-9096
for more information.

April 14–June 11, 2000
Fresno Art Museum
Fresno, California
Call (559) 441-4220
for more information.

Spring 2000
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts
Call (617) 496-1866
for more information.

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